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ABSTRACT

This brief reports on a day-long workshop where eight rural teaching principals shared the joys and frustrations of their multiple roles. The multiple roles of teaching principals in the school and community result in role conflict and role ambiguity, which leads to stress and anxiety. Newly hired teaching principals are often caught between pressures to conform to the status quo while also remaining true to his or her own professional goals. Interpersonal and managerial role conflict stresses are almost invariably compounded by overload, especially from mandated paperwork. Teaching principals also reported the benefits of having the freedom to make curricular changes and having daily contact with students. A central problem is navigating between role taking and role making. The traits of pacing and consistency appear important for successful role making. Community support can be won through credibility, professionalism, and outreach. Principals described public relations efforts such as writing articles for local newspapers or newsletters, involving students in community work, and educating board members. The brief contains a list of participants' names and addresses, and hints on how to cope with the role of teaching principal. (KS)

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The Rural Teaching Principal: Meeting the Challenges of Multiple Roles

Joan McRobbie

Often in small rural schools, the principal is also a full-time teacher. It isn't rare for that same person to be the district superintendent as well — not to mention community leader, colleague, and bus driver; spouse, parent and friend. If the nostalgic notion of rural schools as throwbacks to a simpler era held true, such multiple roles might seem merely quaint. But today's rural communities are marked by the same societal changes — deepening poverty, teen pregnancy, and drug use; larger numbers of non-English speaking students — that burden urban and suburban schools. And under new statewide reform mandates, rural schools must meet the same requirements as their better-equipped counterparts, even though short on both staff and resources.

The result for the rural teaching principal is a level of stress that can threaten the very satisfactions that drew him or her to the job. Small size means the chance to know every child and family. A small staff can make it far easier to achieve teamwork and collegiality. And the lack of bureaucracy allows change to happen fast; teachers don't have to wait years to implement new practices and see kids' academic and personal gains. But these rewards are clearly dependent on how well one can tolerate unceasing role transition, ambiguity, and overload.

Because these exact themes — individualized instruction, expanded teacher authority and responsibility, and shared decision-making — underlie all of today's education reforms, those who design school change are looking to the rural experience for insights on the day-to-day human impact of a range of innovations from career ladders to mentor teacher programs to site-based management. This *Brief* reports on Far West Laboratory's recent day-long workshop where eight rural teaching principals shared the joys and frustrations of their multiple roles with our Rural Schools Assistance Program staff and consultants from the University of Utah and Pinal County, Arizona.

Complex Roles, Colliding Expectations Lead to Stress

Consider the principal who must inform a longtime friend that the friend's child is in serious trouble. Or one concerned about her own child's progress but hesitant to be frank with the child's teacher, who is both a subordinate and old college roommate. Imagine the dilemma for the principal-teacher whose own son or daughter is up for a school award — the mother wants to step back and let her child shine; the professional fears that others will suspect favoritism. Indeed, think of the guilt the principal-teacher-parent feels upon realizing that his own children get less attention than any other kids in town; arriving home from a night board meeting after a full teaching day that started with pre-dawn paperwork, dad has precious little energy to help with algebra homework.

Such "role conflict stress" is the daily lot of the teaching principal. And for someone new to the job, it may be superimposed on pressures to conform to community expectations that are at odds with personal goals. Susan Bassett, who left San Diego to run a newly revivified school in a tiny remote Southern Utah town, is a case in point. After six years of trying, the community had finally won permission from the local school board to re-open the one-room, K-6 Boulder Elementary School which had been closed for 30 years. By bringing in Bassett, the parents could avoid having their children taught in the neighboring town by the same four teachers who had taught local kids for three generations. They wanted a completely new kind of school — or so they said. But as Bassett began implementing her instructional program, she discovered a vexing psychology at work: deep down parents really wanted "tradition," delivered by a likable new face.

Joseph Semones stepped into a situation in rural Arizona with similar threads. Not only did Sentinel Elementary lack such basics as a prepared budget and a system for teacher evaluation, but its teachers had participated in a lawsuit against each other. When Semones arrived as principal, eager to make educational improvements for these largely poverty-stricken children and families, some regarded him as a "white shirt guy from uptown" who would only add to their problems. His job was to make peace, make headway, *and* survive the minute-by-minute conflicts of being both boss and colleague.

Role Ambiguity Translates to Anxiety

Each of these professionals, notes the University of Utah's Ann Hart, is a "boundary spanner." They continually move from role to role, constantly redefining each role. In the first examples, the stresses are poignantly emotional, cutting as they do across personal and professional lines and sometimes playing havoc with family, friendships, and career. The energy-draining ambiguity — "At this moment with this person, am I principal or parent, supervisor or peer, colleague or

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Workshop Participants

Susan Bassett, Boulder Elementary, P.O. Box 1399, Boulder, UT 84716, (801) 335-7322.

Rosalie Collins, Coffee Creek Elementary, Star Route 2, Box 4740, Trinity Center, CA 96091, (916) 266-3344.

Mary Lou Gammon, Bonita Elementary School District, Sunset Road, Box 1, Wilcox, AZ 85643, (602) 828-3363.

Frank Klell, Red Rock Elementary, Sasco Road, Red Rock, AZ 85245, (602) 682-3331.

Dale Norton, Amargosa Elementary and Middle Schools, HCR Box 401Z, Amargosa Valley, NV 89020, (702) 372-5324.

Robert Parks, Tabiona Elementary and High Schools, P.O. Box 446, Tabiona, UT 84072, (801) 848-5635.

Joseph Semones, Sentinel Elementary School, Star Route Box 57, Dateland, AZ 85333, (602) 868-5801.

Cherel Wayte, Castle Rock Elementary, P.O. Box 146, Castello, CA 96017, (916) 235-0101.

Ann Hart, Department of Educational Administration, 339 Milton Bennion Hall, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112, (801) 581-3373.

Peggy Roush, Pinal County Office of Education, 30 North Pinal Street, Florence, AZ 85232, (602) 868-5801.

friend?" — is cropping up in schools around the country in all settings as teachers take on added authority and responsibility, principals share decision-making, and mentors struggle with ways to become helpers and supporters to sometimes resentful longtime peers.

In the cases of Bassett and Semones, tensions mirror those encountered by many a newly hired manager: he or she is caught between pressures to conform to the status quo while also remaining true to his or her own professional goals. Theirs is another kind of tightrope act — to play their roles as they want to while trying to keep the community behind them. Bassett was presented, on the one hand, with what is "right and proper" — the way grandpa went to school is what school is; you don't put kids in cooperative groups; computers have nothing to do with teaching writing. On the other hand, she is striving for good professional practice, wanting to incorporate the best research on how children learn as well as the many advances in areas such as technology.

Semones too must be careful not to break taboos. Meanwhile, he must accomplish his mission in increments. Before initiating changes in management practice, he must try to get all factions talking to each other. That role requires gaining trust — proving that the feared "uptown guy" is actually a knowledgeable, nice person who isn't going to hurt anyone.

Overload Complicates the Problems

In today's rural setting, interpersonal and managerial role conflict stresses are almost invariably compounded by overload. Rural administrators find themselves faced with the legislatively-mandated timelines and deadlines given all schools, but their ability to comply — especially with all the necessary paperwork — is hurt by a lack of staff. Robert Parks of Utah's Tabiona Elementary and High Schools drew a burst of laughter from the workshop group when he reported, "I say to my superintendent, 'I can't handle it all.' He says, 'Delegate!'" Someone wryly quipped: "Sure, take it from your right hand and give it to your left."

As each state pushes for greater accountability, policymakers are rapidly issuing new requirements. The result among many rural educators is a dread of the pace of change, according to Arizona curriculum specialist Peggy Roush. "They fear they'll be blown away," she said, and one principal quickly underscored that sentiment by wishing aloud that his state's legislature would "stay home for a year and give schools time to catch up." Individual circumstances can worsen the pressures. Utah's Parks, for instance, notes that extracurriculars such as coaching athletics and judging agricultural meets make for a particular time crunch at the high school level. He also must attend a monthly principals' meeting that's only an hour long but involves eight hours of driving time as well as time to prepare lesson plans for the lay person who takes over his teaching duties in lieu of any available certificated substitute.

Ironically, part of rural overload stems from the dedication and sense of mission that brings many educators to the rural setting in the first place. Rosalie Collins, for instance, once taught 48 students on the third floor of a large building within the San Francisco school system. Now a 17-year veteran running California's two-teacher Coffee Creek Elementary School, she remains thrilled with the way this job feeds her soul. "Here I can really teach, really make things happen. There's an enormous amount of freedom. You want to change curriculum? You just do it. Hands-on science? Just do it. In a large district, we'd still be writing the plans on how to start. Here we just say, tomorrow let's try it. We don't have limitations; we have trust. Everybody is friends, and there's a lot of excitement."

Frank Klell of Arizona's Red Rock Elementary School adds, "Where other principals don't even know their kids, we have daily contact with ours."

But so much personal involvement also easily leads to giving of oneself to the breaking point. Admits Collins: "Besides your own home, you have another building with a roof and lawns. You're nurturing another whole family. No one else in the community has a role quite like this. You take on more and more responsibility. It's exciting, but you keep expanding your job." The point is perhaps capsulized by Mary Lou Gammon's story of her young daughter's dilemma when her mother became principal at Arizona's Bonita Elementary School. "What should I call you?" the child asked. Indeed,

Gammon thought, what should any of the kids call her? Around town, she was "Mary Lou." But wouldn't "Mrs. Gammon" be better as principal? Such questions turned out to be moot when she and her daughter showed up together. To the whole school, she was quickly and unequivocally "Mother."

Staying Sane: Role Taking Versus Role Making

So how does the teaching principal, particularly the rural newcomer, surmount the obstacles? To scholar Ann Hart, the central problem is navigating the continual push and pull between role taking and role making. "You walk into a social environment which has already defined and constructed your role. Yet you have professional training, personal background, and a vision that all may differ from that community's expectations." The traditional rural principal, for example, is male, wears gray suits, has 2.8 kids, and is a church leader; you, the new principal, are female, have no kids, and perhaps don't belong to the church. Role making, or "the attempt to forge a new social reality," thus becomes the challenge.

There's no formula for successful role making, but two traits — pacing and consistency — appear of paramount importance. Utah's Susan Bassett, caught in her unexpected bind when the community said one thing ("give us a new kind of school") and meant another ("don't make change"), relates that after seven years of quiet persistence she has finally won trust. Her main tactic? "I would say, 'Let's try it this way this one time, and if it works, great.'" Rosalie Collins, eager to upgrade management practices when she first arrived at Coffee Creek, quickly learned to slow the agenda down. "I was told I was overdoing my 'bureaucratise.'" She later realized that townspeople expected her tenure to be brief. "People are really surprised when you stay with it," she says.

Over the years, consistency on priority issues, such as protection of the instructional day, is critical. You can't, for instance, allow routine early dismissal, students reading all day in the gym, or

Hints on How to Cope

Straddling the roles of teacher and administrator may never be conflict free, but there are ways to keep the minute-by-minute stresses minimal and ease overload. Some that came clear during the workshop:

Relieving role ambiguity. Be clear to yourself and others which role you're playing when. This may be delineated by time of day. Cherel Wayte, for instance, says she is "teacher only" in the classroom, becoming principal 15 minutes after the teaching day ends. Beginning at around 5:30 she is superintendent. Role delineation may involve being verbally specific. "As your principal, I must give you this information; As your friend, I would advise..."

Subtle ways of "role making": How you dress helps define your own vision of your role. Dale Norton was initially criticized for wearing a coat and tie, but he didn't waver. "I want people to see that I'm the principal." Mary Lou Gammon sees professional dress as particularly important for the woman principal, since traditional expectations otherwise lead visitors to think the janitor is the one in charge. Carry professionalism over into every newsletter, parent memo, and — especially — report card issued by the school. Cherel Wayte is a stickler for good paper and good ink. More than that, every grade on each report card must be substantiated by specific criteria that all her teachers follow.

Finding time to observe other teachers. If possible, have another teacher take over your classes. Dale Norton spends five to 10 minutes in each classroom every day. He tells his secretary, "If anyone calls, I'm observing."

Accomplishing staff development. Take advantage of county office or regional service center inservice whenever possible. Create situations in which staff help each other. Frank Klell's school, for instance, has a garden and greenhouse and teachers work together to develop units, K-8, around garden-related themes. Consider bartering. Mary Lou Gammon knows all the superintendents in two counties and their varying areas of expertise. "I say, 'I'll do inservice for you if you'll do the same for us.'"

Covering all required subject areas and services with minimal staff. Take advantage of expertise in the community. Cherel Wayte pays a parent a minimum fee to teach music. Mary Lou Gammon has volunteer nurses. Capitalize on teacher strengths. Dale Norton's teachers, for instance, work out class swaps — one teaching art, the other music. Find resources set up to meet rural schools' needs. Joseph Semones is joining a consortium that will provide special education and physical education.

Managing paperwork. Again, seek the help of your county office, if possible. Cherel Wayte has her budget partially prepared by county office staff. She also says, "Now I put a lot in the wastebasket. I have control over the focus in this small school. I tell my teachers, we're doing language arts this year, not 10 other things."

Generally coping with overload. Restrict your hours. Work six days instead of seven; set reasonable daily hours and then try to stick by them. Research shows you'll accomplish more if you schedule in "down" time to get re-charged.

Getting personal support. Network with other rural teaching principals when possible. Their "tips" can save you hours; their empathy alone is invaluable. Remind yourself often that for a "boundary spanner," chaos is normal. At times, just knowing you aren't crazy can truly help.

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the cancelling of classes three or four times a week for the sake of the sports schedule. Later, once the community is on one's side, bolder changes become possible. One principal, now a 10-year veteran, recently strongly disciplined a teacher who was related to a school board member. "She didn't like the standards I set, and it was insubordination from day one." The teacher under pressure resigned, raising some community backlash. But the principal had strong support from most teachers and parents. And in the next board election, the negative faction's candidate lost.

A Key to Success: Educating the Community

Clearly the passage of time alone doesn't win such community support. Credibility, professionalism (see box), and — perhaps above all — outreach are essential. Cherel Wayte, who arrived last year at California's Castle Rock Elementary School, is defusing inter-community antagonisms by being active in the Rotary Club and writing articles for the local newspaper. Joseph Semones contacted and then visited every home and enrolled the children personally "so that I could see what was behind the scenes." (He found some homes 15 miles from the nearest paved road; others had no running hot water.) Several workshop participants spoke of putting much energy into newsletters sent not only to parents but to others in the community and to local papers.

These efforts are not just good public relations. They are part of a deliberate intent to develop a school-community partnership. The principal intimate with family circumstances can more wisely plan everything from bus routes to homework policies. And by sharing his or her knowledge — about educational research, promising instructional practices, statewide and national educational reforms — a principal can help ensure both backing on his or her proposed school improvements *and* a healthy blood pressure level.

One avid supporter of widely circulated school newsletters is Dale Norton of Nevada's Amargosa Elementary and Middle Schools. He sees these missives as educational tools and as a very pragmatic means of relieving overload. "We run want ads," he explains. "For example, the middle school has an arts and crafts elective, but it's limited — we have no one to teach brush painting or charcoal. So we put in a want ad." Not only is he tapping local artistic talent, but he's heard a number of people remark, "I didn't know you were doing that at the school."

Norton is also a firm believer in getting students out into the community. Amargosa students experimented last year with regularly going to the local nursing home to read to the residents. "People said it wouldn't work, but we've done it now all year long." Again, the benefits run both ways: the students are ambassadors gaining goodwill for the school, and the community is enriched by a valuable service. Says Norton: "Now I'm thinking, who else can we help?"

Educating board members, who are often also parents, can be particularly important — though sometimes delicate — for the teaching principal. Peggy Roush recounts the story of one rural school board that balked at giving its teachers a raise because student test scores remained lower than those of a neighboring school. But board members failed to understand some critical differences. While the neighboring student body was fairly homogeneous and affluent, many kids in this board's school were poor, and 70 percent had a primary language other than English. The principal (also a teacher) brought in an outsider who was able to show the board that their teachers were perhaps twice as deserving because they had helped kids achieve two years' worth of improvement in one.

In the end, whether even the most successful community-wide "role making" can sustain today's rural teaching-principal indefinitely may be an existential question. It struck a chord with the group when Mary Lou Gammon ventured, "It's challenging, wonderful, but you can only stay on this high for so long." Yet Rosalie Collins's summation also resonated: "I am basically a teacher. I agreed to administer a school so that I'd have freedom as a teacher. Now I'm teaching school board members and parents too. But all the while, I'm developing the ideal little teaching situation."

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Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development serves the four-state region of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, working with educators at all levels to plan and carry out school improvements. The mission of FWL is to assist educators in the region by linking them with colleagues; sharing information, expertise and innovative practices; and providing technical assistance to build local capacity for continued self-improvement.

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